Working paper

"She's your everything": Depictions of the #lesbiancouple on Instagram (work in progress)

Stefanie Duguay, Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Working paper presented in the extended session of the LGBTQ SIG, *Queerly Connected: Social Media and Mobile Apps* at the *66th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association: Communicating with Power*, 9-13 June, 2016, Fukuoka, Japan.

**Please note: This is a draft working paper. Please contact me at stefanie.duguay@qut.edu.au if you wish to cite this paper. Thank you!

Abstract
As women who are attracted to women ("queer women") are becoming increasingly visible in mainstream media, social media provide networked infrastructures for remixing popular representations with individuals' everyday identity performances. On the mobile photo-sharing application Instagram, representations of queer women's sexual and romantic relationships range from glamorous photo shoots to impromptu couple selfies, erotic scenes, and pornographic ads. Through mixed methods involving visual content analysis, user interviews, and platform analysis, this paper examines the functions and audiences for these representations. Preliminary findings indicate that many representations paired with hashtags related to queer women's relationships include pornified depictions of hyperfeminine women engaging in sexual activity for a male audience, reproducing broadcast media's heterosexualization of queer women. This content also includes romanticized depictions of normatively beautiful women with salient queer signifiers, communicating appeals toward both male and same-sex attracted female audiences. These representations are notably different from interviewees' photos with partners, which target their audience of followers and potential fans in order to reinforce their sexual identity, affirm their relationship, and publicize their commitment. Despite users' intentions for their relationship representations, they are still subject to consumption and critique by male audiences. Therefore, the reproduction of broadcast media's representations of lesbians on Instagram frames responses to couples' representations, with queer women's representations posing a threat to heteronormativity that is met with discrimination and heterosexualizing objectification.

Keywords: platform studies, LGBT, lesbian, sexuality, Instagram, mobile app, media, relationships

In lowercase Helvetica, the words "she's your everything" overlay an Instagram photo of a young, white woman with long brown hair, wearing a backward snapback hat and a men's cut tank top. She sits on a skateboard with her back to the photographer, playing the guitar in an empty suburban parking lot. The image is overlaid with a grainy, vintage filter and appears with the hashtags #lesbian, #loveislove, #lesbiancouple, #gay, #gaycouple, and #dyke.

Although #lesbiancouple is rife with cutesy quotes such as this, a quick scroll through some of the 252,465[1] posts using this hashtag shows a diversity of representations. There are stylized photos of women in the latest fashion, kissing in parks and in front of sunsets. These are displayed alongside impromptu shots of couples kissing in their homes while wearing everyday clothes with handbags, laundry, and crooked lampshades in the background. Teen girls kiss behind rainbow flags to symbolize #lgbtpride and women in their thirties cuddle in bed with their pet dog near them. There is certainly porn, with many photos advertising 'erotic encounters', but there are also sensual photos by users who do not appear to be selling anything.

This paper will explore representations of same-sex female couples on Instagram as part of a larger study of queer[2] women's practices on social media platforms. Through analysis of the range of user content, interviews with users, and consideration of the platform's features, it is possible to make sense of these images and whether they reproduce broadcast media's representations of lesbian couples or if they allow for new and different representations. Preliminary analysis indicates that much of the content reinforces mainstream representations of lesbians as pornified and heterosexualized for men's pleasure. Although queer women's personal representations aim to display same-sex relationships for their own sake and to affirm LGBTQ women's identities, these too are openly criticized according to the male gaze.

---

[1] Count displayed on the app of October 16, 2015.

[2] Although 'queer' poses challenges as an umbrella term for a diversity of sexual and gender identities (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2009), this paper incorporates the phrase 'queer women' to refer to (self-identified or those presenting as) women who are attracted to women, including such identities as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, fluid, etc. Broader references to diverse sexual identities are made using LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer).

Background and relevance

This paper is part of a broader study that seeks to understand queer women's performances of sexual identity on social media platforms while attending to how platforms play a role in these performances. It responds to the volume of literature produced about the use of digital technology by men who are attracted to men (Campbell, 2004; Light, Fletcher, & Adam, 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010) and the growing literature about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBTQ) people's use of social media in general (Dehaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013; Gray, 2009; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013). This existing research carves a space for the study of queer women's use of contemporary digital media, which builds upon and updates previous studies involving older technologies, like chat rooms (Cooper, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Laukkanen, 2007) and bulletin board systems (Correll, 1995).

Examining the role of platforms in identity performances draws upon approaches in Science and Technology Studies (STS) that take into account the mutual shaping of users and technology in the appropriation of new devices and technological practices (Sismondo, 2010; Williams, 1974). It also heeds more recent invocations from sub-disciplines, such as platform studies and software studies, to attend to the *politics of platforms* (Gillespie, 2010) and how their profit-driven designs shape users' sociality (Gehl, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). This involves examining platforms' business models, public discourse and design. Since the tech industry remains dominated by white, high socioeconomic status men (Marwick, 2013), the analysis of technology is also relevant to identifying how platform designs cater to particular gender and class positions while producing different outcomes for those embodying other identities.

This paper focuses on representations of queer women's sexual and romantic relationships to identify the range of content available on Instagram and how it may feature in identity performances. This investigation is particularly relevant at this time with queer women widely represented in popular media, such as on mainstream TV shows like *Faking It* and *Glee*, which feature key lesbian and/or bisexual characters. These shows, along with highly publicized 'coming out' celebrity stories, such as Ellen Page's speech at the Human Rights Campaign's (2014) conference and Miley Cyrus' identification as

pansexual (Sieczkowski, 2015), make particular depictions of queer women highly visible. These broadcast performances of female, queer identity include depictions of relationships, as fictional lesbians pine for each other or actual celebrities make out in nightclubs, which raise questions of how representations of queer women's relationships may differ on social media. Given the convergence of mainstream media with creative content and interpersonal communication on social media (Burgess & Banks, 2014), queer women's representations on Instagram may reproduce and imitate those perpetuated by mainstream media's but they may also increase the visibility of alternative depictions of identity, sexuality, gender and relationships, stemming from everyday content posted by couples.

At first glance, the range of images related to queer women's relationships on Instagram include a mixture of user-generated photos along with quotes, fan homages to celebrities, and meme-like animations, drawings or messages (e.g. individuals holding signs or chalk boards, similar to YouTube card stories – see Misoch, 2014). These span from individually produced performances, as self-representations that become texts with "the potential for subsequent engagement" (Thumim, 2012, p. 6) to images produced, sourced, and disseminated by accounts that are not reflective of any single user (e.g. @lgbtq.teen is a pseudonymous account that aggregates memes). As such, they have the potential to elucidate contemporary conceptions about queer women and to showcase lived experiences related to claiming particular identities. Some images include multiple identity-related hashtags, such as #gay, #dyke, as well as tags representing identities rarely visible in broadcast media, such as #pansexual, #demisexual, and #asexual. Although some academics, media, and LGBTQ communities declare that same-sex attracted individuals have moved into a 'post-gay era' (Ghaziani, 2011; Nash, 2013), characterized by a desire to have sexual identity acknowledged but not be a defining feature, the practice of tagging images with sexual identifiers may accomplish or defy post-gayness. Users and their contexts are also relevant in determining whether expressions of sexuality are modulated in relation to post-gay aesthetics or merely reflect the need to regulate outness in relation to social media audiences and potential stigmatization of sexuality (Duguay, 2014; Orne, 2011).

Representations of sexual identity, constructed through images of couples, also have implications for whether such images uphold or challenge heteronormativity. Barnhurst (2007) discusses how LGBTQ visibility is a double-edged sword in that its capacity to increase tolerance often comes with the price of stereotyping and assimilation into niche markets. Recent emphasis on 'equal rights' forms of LGBTQ activism has given rise to media and individual representations demonstrating LGBTQ people's sameness with heterosexual people and assertions of normalcy through embracing mainstream values, such as monogamy and domesticity (Richardson, 2005; Warner, 1999). This homonormativity, perpetuating heteronormative standards and values (Duggan, 2002), can be identified in media representations of LGBTQ people through emphasis on consumer products and domesticity (Ng, 2013). It is also evident in mainstream LGBTQ media outlets' reluctance to display representations of same-sex sexuality (Sender, 2003) and the inclusion of benign lesbian content designed to target multiple audience demographics rather than catering to lesbian viewers specifically (Himberg, 2014). Therefore, the visibility of queer women's representations does not equate to recognition of diverse sexual identities or changes in the overarching sexual norms that organize society.

Representing queer women's relationships also implicates gender norms since expressions of sexuality and sexual desire are intertwined with gender performances (Halberstam, 1998). Feminist scholars have identified the emergence of a 'post-feminist sensibility' (Gill, 2007), shifting the objectification of women's bodies into a sexualized subjectivity that requires women to display the active *choice* of presenting themselves in a sexually objectifying manner. However, as Dobson (2015) points out in her study of sexting, expressing sexual desire "is still ultimately missing as *legitimate* for girls" (p. 123), positioning desire as something that women must fulfill for others but not for themselves. Therefore, women still present themselves in accordance with an internalized 'male gaze', self-regulating according to normative beauty standards (Barky, 2003). This study provides the opportunity to understand how gendered and postfeminist discourses mix with queer identities and gender roles.

Queer theorists have raised the possibility that gender could be performed in defiance of the heterosexual matrix that entrenches male and

female gender roles (Butler, 1990). Halberstam (1998) has written about the different ways that queer women incorporate gender into sexual practices and believes that some forms of gender performance, particularly female masculinity, can be expressed without imitating men or reproducing patriarchal discourses. This notion of queer women's sexuality performed outside of normative gender discourses contrasts with studies of lesbian representation in broadcast media that widely identify the media's heterosexualization of lesbian sexuality by imbuing it with a normative femininity aimed at pleasing heterosexual male viewers (Ciasullo, 2001; Diamond, 2005; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). Therefore, if some sexual representations are created without the male gaze in mind, it raises questions as to whether these representations are still affected by postfeminist discourses of objectification. It also warrants investigation as to how removed from patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity queer women's representations can be, especially when broadcast media has nearly rendered butch (and other non-normative gender) representations extinct (Ciasullo, 2001). Further, distinctive identity representations can indicate challenges to mainstream norms just as much as they can attest to the persistence of these norms. Identity symbols, such as plaid shirts stereotypically indicative of lesbian identity, can lend themselves to the generation of an affective, commodity-supported "intimate public" (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). Berlant (2008) describes intimate publics as juxtapolitical in their focus on personal, emotional content that is *near* politics in its reflection of personal struggle and historical oppression. Therefore, analysis may identify queer female Instagrammers as an intimate public that can elucidate "why things do not change" (Berlant, 2008: 24) and demonstrate the everyday survival of queer women and their relationships despite ongoing and entrenched heteronormativity.

By taking into account technological influences on representations, this study identifies how social media are involved in shaping queer women's representations. While focusing on Instagram responds to the need for social media research to consider platforms aside from Facebook and Twitter (Rains & Brunner, 2015), these platforms exist within a connected social media ecology. Facebook's ownership of Instagram (Stern, 2012) influences affordances and

constraints on representations, from providing streamlined connections between Instagram and Facebook audiences to adopting similar governance procedures that, like Facebook, favor censorship of nudity and content deemed inappropriate (McHugh, 2013). Instagram's mandate as a platform for sharing "works of art" (Apple, 2015) factors into users' representations as it determines the content generation features offered (Duguay, 2016). Images on Instagram also exist within a sophisticated economy, with platform-supported advertising, spam accounts, and professional Instagrammers participating in brand promotion (Abidin, 2014). These platform dynamics factor into who and what is visible on Instagram with implications for how identities are represented. Therefore, mixed methods involving consideration of user narratives, representational content, and platform context are necessary to understand contemporary social media representations of queer women's relationships.

Methods

As this is a work in progress, I have completed some components of data analysis while others remain undeveloped. This study is part of a larger project that combines data from three methods: a platform walkthrough of Instagram, API querying and content analysis, and interviews with Instagram users. I have interrogated Instagram's platform dynamics through the use of a walkthrough method (Burgess, Light, & Duguay, 2015) designed to examine mobile apps' technological, economic, social, and cultural relations. Corresponding with the *computational turn* (Berry, 2012) in social and cultural research that analyses social relations through digital technology, the walkthrough incorporates methods of the medium (Rogers, 2013) as it involves a detailed examination of apps' technological features. It subscribes to a relational ontology, incorporating the theoretical toolkit of Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005; Law, 1999) to consider the role of human and non-human actors in platform assemblages. This approach also draws on van Dijck's (2013) process of disassembling platforms to examine apps' technology, content, users, ownership, governance, and business models. For this research, I have paired the walkthrough's ANT foundations with a theoretical lens of queer theory, which understands sexuality, gender, and identity as constructed and ongoing performances that are fluid,

unstable, and shaped by the circulation of discourses (Beasley, 2005; Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1979).

In applying the walkthrough method to Instagram, I collected and analyzed the company's promotional materials (e.g. blog posts, app store information), governance stipulations (e.g. terms of service), and discourse in popular and tech media. I also conducted a step-by-step walkthrough of Instagram's features, commencing with registration, investigating activity flows available during everyday use, and finishing with account deletion. During the technical walkthrough, I recorded field notes and screenshots to identify influential mediators (Latour, 2005), which alter or influence the creation of representations.

The next stage of the study involved systematic analysis of representations tagged with hashtags related to same-sex women (e.g. #lesbian, #inkedlesbians, #bisexual, #girlswholikegirls). Although this paper originally imagined focusing on #lesbiancouple as a subset of this content, the hashtag has been unavailable for months. This results from Instagram's censorship strategies, in which it makes invisible content paired with tags that have been flagged as housing too much 'inappropriate content' (McHugh, 2013). Regardless, further examination of content from queer women's hashtags has shown that they are often tagged with multiple related tags and that representations of couples are tagged with many different queer tags. Therefore, this paper's findings speak to the range of couples' representations within the entire dataset collected through this method.

My content collection approach aligned with Highfield and Leaver's (2015) observation that Instagram research can be conducted in ways similar to Twitter research, examining a sample of posts and metadata sourced through a hashtag. I carried out data collection using the University of Amsterdam's Instagram Scraper[3], which compiled images and metadata in an HTML format allowing for close examination of each image and comparison among images. I identified the top 22 most popular queer women's hashtags on Instagram at the time and ran these through the scraper, collecting around 20 images for each. After cleaning the sample by removing pornography and unrelated content (e.g.

[3] https://tools.digitalmethods.net/beta/instagram/

images tagged with #boi but within the context of a different language or simply meaning 'boy' without any queer meanings), my sample included 497 photos. I have sorted these according to content type and applied visual textual analysis (McKee, 2014) to further examine images relating to lesbian couples.

For my interviews with Instagram users, I recruited participants by identifying individual producers of the content collected through the API and sending them messages over Instagram. Six women (out of 38 requests) responded and I sampled another two participants through a call I posted to Facebook. Altogether, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Instagram users, all identifying as lesbian except one who identified as gay. Participants were from a range of countries including the USA, Australia, Canada and one participant was from Thailand. They ranged in age from 24 – 46 years of age and although half of the sample was white, four participants described their ethnicities as African American, Thai, half Japanese and half white, and mixed Hawaiian, Chinese and Filipino. I transcribed and coded the interviews, identifying descriptive, topical, and analytical trends (Morse & Richards, 2002), and also analyzed participants' Instagram photos, which were discussed during the interview. All participants but one gave consent for their photos to be used in scholarly works. Several participants wanted to be identifiable through their Instagram username, which I include in reference to their photos and narratives, and those who did not wish to be identifiable by name have been given (or have chosen) pseudonyms. The following findings include participants' discussions of representing themselves as part of a couple or representations of lesbian couples more generally. Their narratives have been synthesized with findings from the content analysis and walkthrough methods to identify the range of representations of lesbian couples on Instagram along with platform influences as to how these representations are produced and circulated.

Findings and Discussion

Mainstream reproductions

Through my analysis, I identified that some elements of broadcast media's representations of lesbian couples were reproduced on Instagram while users also produced representations that deviated from these for multiple purposes.

The reproduction and reinforcement of mainstream representations was identifiable in my broader content analysis but largely absent from interviewees' images. Specifically, the content collected included two types of mainstream representations: pornified lesbians and heterosexy lesbians. As I discuss each, it will become clear that these representations exist on a continuum of representations reinforcing heteronormativity, varying in sexual explicitness, but that heterosexy lesbians may have a wider target audience.

There is a great deal of pornography on Instagram, which is regularly blocked, removed, and censored. However, querying through the API retrieved the freshest posts and therefore my initial content collection included many pornographic images or images advertising sexual services, which had yet to be removed. These images are clearly targeted at men, as the women's bodies meet heteronormative beauty standards and their accompanying captions advertise pornography, web cam, and sexting sites aimed at men. Many of these posts used tags alluding to lesbian hook-ups, such as #lesbianlove or #girlswholikegirls, to tap into the longstanding male sexual fantasy of women having sex with each other for men's enjoyment (Jenefsky & Miller, 1998). Sifting through these images, most involve one woman posing seductively with varying amounts of clothing, rather than two women engaging in sexual conduct. Therefore, the tags simply invoke the fantasy while leaving the individual woman available for the male viewer who is further stimulated by the hashtag as a signifier that this woman may fit into the girl-on-girl fantasy. Similar to other instances in broadcast media where women engage in sexual activity for a male audience, such as Madonna kissing Britney Spears at the MTV music awards in 2003, these hyperfeminine representations heterosexualize the individuals involved, erasing or trivializing actual same-sex attraction (Ciasullo, 2001; Diamond, 2005).

Another common occurrence within the content dataset included clothed and aesthetically pleasing images of what I have termed 'heterosexy lesbians.' This draws on Dobson's (2015) concept of heterosexy as the way that girls are socialized from a young age to align themselves with normative standards of femininity and heteronormativity by adopting the symbols, fashions, poses and behaviors associated with current gendered notions of sex-appeal. Heterosexy lesbians follow many of the same visual conventions as the woman described in

the introduction: they are young, slender, white, and their femininity is notable through features such as long, shiny straightened hair, make-up, and well-tended eyebrows. Everything about these women meets normative beauty standards and adheres to feminine norms except for the inclusion of some indicator, usually a piece of lesbian-related fashion, that they are not altogether heterosexual. These indicators (rarely present all at once) include snapback hats, sports uniforms or jackets, skateboards and skater apparel, baggy jeans, and loose tank tops. The addition of men's fashion items, which signify 'lesbian fashion' when worn by women, serves to accentuate the women's otherwise seamless attainment of feminine attractiveness.

These representations share similarities with some forms of 'digital dreamgirls' identified by Dobson (2015) on young women's social media profiles. Dreamgirls are commodified as out-of-reach and idealized objects of desire. The heterosexy lesbians remain objects of desire for men in their alignment with heteronormative beauty but they are also desirable to female-attracted women as they fulfill standards of attractiveness with the possibility that they may be open to same-sex activity. As Thornham (2007) notes that women can only be sexual beings in relation to the existing patriarchal framework of attraction, heterosexy lesbians' attainment of heteronormative attractiveness also produces them as a lesbian fantasy for same-sex attracted women. Their depiction in front of beautiful landscapes and in romantic poses further reinforces this fantasy. The images are passed around by aggregator accounts (e.g. @_girlswholikegirlslikeboysdo_) as idealized commodities without a certain source of origin.

Identity performance and backlash

Of the interview participants, four were in a relationship (two with each other and two with people outside of the study). Since participants' partners featured in their Instagram accounts, we discussed their decision to represent themselves as a couple. None of the participants' images were targeted at male audiences or particularly heterosexy. Instead, their narratives and photos indicated that their representations as a lesbian couple were intended to communicate key messages about their identity and their relationship.

Julie, a 46 year old woman who came out later in life after meeting her partner, described how representation as part of a couple made her lesbian identity visible:

> I think it's very hard for me to actually communicate my identity as a lesbian in a selfie without being with my partner because of - in terms of the way people sort of stereotype LGBT people, I don't think I necessarily fulfill any of the stereotypes.

She frequently posts photos with her partner on Instagram, tagging her partner's username in them and including a couple's hashtag derived from their nicknames. Since she runs children's and church youth programs, Julie worries about parents reacting negatively to her sexuality. She feels that coming out has been, "happier and better for me personally but professionally and socially harder." This aligns with Barnhursts' (2007) description of visibility as having the capacity to liberate individuals while also putting them at risk of increased stereotyping and prejudice. As a result, Julie rarely posts photos displaying intimacy between her and her partner.

Julie navigated me to an exception, which was created through a third-party app to compile a 'year in review' collage featuring multiple photos with her partner. The top right photo is a close-up of Julie and her partner kissing, which she describes as "the most outrageous thing I've done on social media!" She was also surprised to scroll through her profile and see a full photo of her kissing her partner, "Whoa, back down on November 30th, there's another radical kissing on the cheek one!" While Julie feels the need to include her partner in photos in order to be out about her sexuality, she considers these photos expressing her same-sex sexuality to be "outrageous" and "radical" given her account's professional purpose and the potential audience of her more conservative acquaintances. When I asked why none of her couples' photos had sexuality-related hashtags, she described how pairing such photos with LGBTQ-related hashtags would be responded to negatively by her professional contacts. In this way, she maintains her sexuality as a personal aspect rather than launching it into a very visible and more political sphere through the addition of hashtags. This is similar to the way that broadcast media includes lesbian characters in TV and film but minimizes potential backlash from conservative viewers by

maintaining sexuality as personal and downplaying the character's counter positioning to heteronormative values, attitudes and policies (Dow, 2001). Julie's photos with her partner are juxtapolitical (Berlant, 2008), demonstrating how she manages being out despite heteronormativity influencing her daily self-representational decisions.

In contrast, the couple that I interviewed, Emi and @Queenie_von_curves (henceforth referred to as Queenie), posted frequently about their relationship, including intimate displays, such as kissing or lying in bed together. Queenie, a burlesque performer who recently came out when she started dating Emi, also discussed how important it is for her to represent their relationship:

> I am posting a lot more selfies that are not just of me since I've been with Emi because, for me, that's just been, it's just been such a freeing part of my life to be able to really be true to myself and to be so lucky that when I really took the plunge to feel true to myself that I had someone by my side the whole time.

Although Queenie has visibly queer signifiers, such as rainbow-dyed hair, she feels the need to include her partner in self-representations as reinforcement of her identity and relationship choices.

Emi does not feel as reliant on co-representations with Queenie. As a drag king and tattoo artist, Emi has been out since age 17 and has a visibly queer appearance through her adoption of men's fashion, bodybuilding, as well as multiple piercings and tattoos. She described how Queenie influences her posting of couple photos, "It's like, 'Oh well, you haven't been posting photos of us, so' – so I get bullied into it sometimes." Since Emi uses Instagram less frequently than Queenie, her lack of investment in posting couple photos also results from less engagement with the platform altogether. Queenie, on the other hand, is an avid Instagrammer and uses representations of the couple while participating in memes. She mentioned to Emi, "I moonday-ed your butt" while we looked a photo of the couple posing in matching rainbow underwear, showing off their tattoos for #moonday, a common platform practice through which users post photos of their butts on Mondays. For Queenie, this is part of her microcelebrity and self-branding practices (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013), in

which she engages for the purpose of gaining followers to further her professional burlesque and modeling endeavors.

Although Queenie and Emi's representations were not created with male audiences in mind, they were not entirely removed from the male gaze and girl-on-girl pornographic fantasy. Queenie has many male followers due to her modeling and burlesque photos and describes receiving dick pics and sexual comments as "just part of what I have to deal with in the industry I'm in." However, she noted a distinctive drop in her number of followers after she started posting photos with Emi, who does not meet heterosexy standards of attraction, and received negative comments from her male followers. She described noticing this shift:

> But I think for some of the straight male followers that I had who would comment or like the photos that I had that were scantily clade or things like that, I think knowing I was a lesbian was a turn-off for them because they couldn't imagine things, to be honest.

By posting photos of her relationships, which made Queenie unavailable as a sex object while inhibiting the girl-on-girl fantasy through Emi's non-normative appearance, Queenie represented her queer relationship for herself and for other queer women. However, her male followers felt entitled to express their displeasure with this through ongoing barrages of harassing messages.

Another participant who is out and active on LGBTQ-related hashtags, @mitagibson (henceforth Mïta), often posted photos of her wife and children with #LGBTfamily. As a transwoman having transitioned a few years earlier, these representations serve to reinforce her identity and intentionally raise awareness that "there can be two women that can have a family, there can be two women that can have kids, genetic kids." Mïta frequently includes her wife in photos and while her wife does not have an Instagram account, her presence is acknowledged in hashtags through the inclusion of #pansexual. Mïta explained that she began adding this tag after her wife decided that it described her sexual identity: "For a while it was bisexual but she wasn't really bisexual cause like, she didn't know the term pansexual, basically, you know. And now that she knows about it, that's what she prefers." By including #pansexual, Mïta is not only expressing her wife's sexual identity but also reinforcing her own identity. If her

wife identified as heterosexual, this would not be acknowledging Mïta's gender post-transition. More specifically, #pansexual affirms Mïta's identity as a transwoman since pansexual includes attraction to a spectrum of gender identities. Pansexual is thought to be a more inclusive sexual identity than bisexual, which is sometimes understood as indicating attraction solely to male or female gender expressions or binary biological sex (Elizabeth, 2013). By identifying her partner's sexual identity as pansexual in photos, Mïta underscores her own identity and her wife's acceptance of it.

Mïta's open sharing of representations with her family have also received mixed responses. She has cross-posted photos and videos to Reddit, on a trans subreddit, and YouTube, which have sparked conversations with others who are considering transitioning and hope to have a family as well one day. Mïta noted that her sharing was especially important for opening conversations with trans people's partners who asked how Mïta was able to continue her relationship with her wife throughout her transition. While these conversations allowed Mïta to support others and share about her experience, she also received comments and messages from individuals discriminating against trans people or fetishizing them. Mïta described the latter as being more common as she could only recall a receiving two hateful messages but regularly receives unwanted sexual attention:

> What I was getting with Kik and I still get with Instagram – though not as much – is the fucking dick pics. I just – it makes me throw up, right? Like I don't want to see that stuff. What goes through a person's mind that makes – like that tells them 'yes, this is a good decision'?

These messages have become so frequent that Mïta attempted to prevent them by capitalizing "LESBIAN" and "MARRIED" in her bio, though this has not proven to be effective. To these male audiences, Mïta's self-representations and representations of her wife and family are viewed as an invitation to send explicit and heterosexualizing messages that ignore Mïta's lesbian identity and sexually objectify her.

Affective and public relationship reinforcement

Along with the role of couples' representations in identity construction, couples' photos also served to strengthen their relationship ties and signal their commitment to others. Emi and Queenie's photos regularly include tags serving as indicators of their relationship's intensity, such as #cantwaittomarrythisbabe, while Mïta includes captions in photos of her wife, such as "She's just sooooooooo beautiful!!!" These outward expressions of affection notify Instagram followers about couples' commitments, which can be a form of delineating relational boundaries but can also provide examples of real-life lesbian couples outside of heterosexy ideals. This latter function was demonstrated by Emi's experience of encountering people who are following her and Queenie as a couple, "I meet people where it's like 'Oh my god, you guys are so cute' or whatever." With Emi's alternative appearance and Queenie's advocacy for body positivity and "sexy at any size", their photos depart from dreamgirl ideals to present a couple outside of mainstream norms with which others can identify.

The use of couples' hashtags (custom hashtags used to identify a couple) not only reinforces the intertwining of two accounts (and by extension, people) but also creates an affective archive of photos documenting the relationship over time. Emi explained the couple-specific signifiers that contributed to their hashtag:

> #rainbowdashandsoarin4ever, which is cause, um, my girlfriend has rainbow hair and so she gets called Rainbowdash a lot and then my, uh, drag persona that I have is, looks a lot like the other pony Soarin. So we've decided those are our names.

The couple developed their hashtag from nicknames derived from My Little Pony characters, the symbols of which also appear in the matching tattoos displayed in their #moonday couple selfie. Including unique references to the couple's nicknames adds an affective element to the couples' hashtag whereby it comes to meaningfully symbolize their relationship.

When I asked about their main motivation in developing a couples' hashtag, Emi, Queenie and Julie pointed out the functionality whereby it allows partners to see all their photos together. This generates an archive for the couple, similar to the functionality of a 'photo album' without Instagram having

designated affordances for albums, such as those featured on Facebook. While Facebook pushes new photos out to friends, appearing multiple times in Newsfeed as individuals comment and remaining prominently displayed on a user's Timeline, couples' hashtags on Instagram invite users to view this aggregation of photos if they want but they can also be ignored altogether. This 'pull' functionality of subtly allowing the couples' photos to be viewed together is similar to other ways that social media users moderate the salience of their 'publicly private' behavior by limiting or obscuring access through platform affordances (Lange, 2007). Despite mainly discussing this archiving function, Queenie touched on all three purposes – archiving, relationship signaling, and personal relationship affirmation – when she summed up:

> I really like the couple hashtag personally, just for me, cause I just think it's fun to put it on all that stuff so people can recognize that, you know, it's both of us and it's something that we share and yeah, it's mostly just personal, makes me happy.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a preliminary analysis of representations involving queer women's sexual and romantic relationships on Instagram. Through an analysis of content with queer women's hashtags, user interviews, and the platform itself, I have identified a range of representations. There are many that reinforce broadcast media's depiction of hyperfeminine, sexualized lesbians featured for the pleasure of male audiences. Pornified content with hashtags related to lesbian relationships stimulate girl-on-girl male fantasies. Heterosexy lesbians appear as a homogenous slew of images that fulfill normative beauty standards while importing lesbian signifiers to appeal to both men and women. Instagrammers whom I interviewed had different aims for their representations. They snapped selfies with their partners to reinforce their own sexual identity, as illustrated by Julie's increased visibility, Queenie's feelings of freedom, and Mïta's notion that her family selfies fortify her political statements. Couples' photos and the use of custom couple's hashtags also created an affective archive while communicating about and affirming their relationship. These aims, however, were also met with heteronormative and

heterosexualizing responses. Male audiences criticized displays of same-sex attraction not targeted toward them and also attempted to regain heterosexual attention by sending sexual messages and photos. These findings indicate that, as with mainstream media, pornified and heterosexy depictions of same-sex attracted women are widely reproduced and expected on Instagram. While this study's participants demonstrated that it is possible for queer women to produce representations for themselves, their partners, and other women, the threat that these representations pose toward heteronormativity is often met with pressures toward assimilation and heterosexualiation through discrimination and sexual harassment.

References

Abidin, C. (2014). #In$tagLam: Instagram as a repository of taste, a burgeoning marketplace, a war of eyeballs. In M. Berry & M. Schleser (Eds.), *Mobile media making in an age of Smartphones* (pp. 119–128). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Apple. (2015). Instagram. Retrieved October 29, 2015, from https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/instagram/id389801252?mt=8

Barker, M., Richards, C., & Bowes-Catton, H. (2009). "All the world is queer save thee and ME …": Defining queer and bi at a critical sexology seminar. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *9*(3-4), 363–379.

Barnhurst, K. G. (2007). Visibility as paradox: Representation and simultaneous contrast. In K. G. Barnhurst (Ed.), *Media Queered: Visibility and its discontents* (pp. 1–22). New York: Peter Lang.

Bartky, S. (2003). Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power: Sexuality, appearance, and behavior. In R. Weitz (Ed.), *The politics of women's bodies* (pp. 25-45). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beasley, C. (2005). *Gender & sexuality: Critical theories, critical thinkers*. London: Sage.

Berlant, L. (2008). *The female complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Berry, D. M. (2012). Introduction. In D. M. Berry (Ed.), *Understanding Digital*

Humanities (pp. 1–20). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Burgess, J., & Banks, J. (2014). Social media. In S. Cunningham & S. Turnbull (Eds.), *The media & communications in Australia (4th Edition)* (pp. 285–289). Crows Nest, NWS, AU: Allen & Unwin.

Burgess, J., Light, B., & Duguay, S. (2015). Studying HookUp apps: A comparative platform analysis of Tinder, Mixxxer, Squirt, and Dattch. *ICA 65th Annual Conference: Communication Across the Life Span*, *21-25 May* (San Juan, Puerto Rico).

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Campbell, J. E. (2004). *Getting it on online: Cyberspace, gay male sexuality, and embodied identity*. New York: Routledge.

Ciasullo, A. M. (2001). Making her (in)visible: Cultural representations of lesbianism and the lesbian body in the 1990s. *Feminist Studies*, *27*(3), 577–608.

Cooper, M. (2010). Lesbians who are married to men: Identity, collective stories, and the Internet online community. In C. Pullen & M. Cooper (Eds.), *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* (pp. 75–86). New York: Routledge.

Correll, S. (1995). The ethnography of an electronic bar: The Lesbian Cafe. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *24*(3), 270–298. doi:10.1177/089124195024003002

Dehaan, S., Kuper, L. E., Magee, J. C., Bigelow, L., & Mustanski, B. S. (2013). The interplay between online and offline explorations of identity, relationships, and sex: A mixed-methods study with LGBT youth. *Journal of Sex Research*, *50*(5), 421–434. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.661489

Diamond, L. M. (2005). "I'm straight but I kissed a girl": The trouble with American media representations of female-female sexuality. *Feminism & Psychology*, *15*(1), 104–110. doi:10.1177/0959353505049712

Dobson, A. S. (2015). *Postfeminst digital cultures: Femininity, social media, and self-representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dow, B. (2001). Ellen, television, and the politics of gay and lesbian visibility. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *18*(2), 123–140. doi:10.1080/07393180128077

Duggan, L. (2002). The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In R. Castronovo & D. D. Nelson (Eds.), *Materializing democracy: Toward a revitalized culture politics* (pp. 175–194). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Duguay, S. (2014). "He has a way gayer Facebook than I do": Investigating sexual identity disclosure and context collapse on a social networking site. *New Media & Society*. doi:10.1177/1461444814549930

Duguay, S. (2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer visibility through selfies: Comparing platform mediators across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine presence. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(2), 1–12. doi:10.1177/2056305116641975

Edwards, M. (2010). Transconversations: New media, community, and identity. In C. Pullen & M. Cooper (Eds.), *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* (pp. 159–172). New York: Routledge.

Elizabeth, A. (2013). Challenging the binary: Sexual identity that is not duality. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *13*(3), 329–337. doi:10.1080/15299716.2013.813421

Foucault, M. (1979). *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1: An introduction*. London: Allen Lane.

Gehl, R. W. (2014). *Reverse engineering social media: Software, culture, and political economy in new media capitalism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Ghaziani, A. (2011). Post-gay collective identity construction. *Social Problems*, *58*(1), 99–125. doi:10.1525/sp.2011.58.1.99.100

Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *10*(2), 147–166.

Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of "platforms." *New Media & Society*, *12*(3), 347–364. doi:10.1177/1461444809342738

Gray, M. L. (2009). *Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2015). A methodology for mapping Instagram hashtags. *First Monday*, *20*(1). Retrieved from

http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5563/4195

Himberg, J. (2014). Multicasting: Lesbian programming and the changing landscape of cable TV. *Television & New Media*, *15*(4), 289–304. doi:10.1177/1527476412474351

Human Rights Campaign. (2014). *Ellen Page joins HRCF's Time to Thrive conference.* Retrieved October 19, 2015, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hlCEIUATzg

Jackson, S., & Gilbertson, T. (2009). `Hot Lesbians': Young people's talk about representations of lesbianism. *Sexualities*, *12*(2), 199–224. doi:10.1177/1363460708100919

Jenefsky, C., & Miller, D. H. (1998). Phallic intrusion: Girl-girl sex in Penthouse. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *21*(4), 375–385. doi:10.1016/S0277-5395(98)00042-9

Lange, P. G. (2007). Publicly private and privately public: Social networking on YouTube. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 361–380. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00400.x

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Laukkanen, M. (2007). Young queers online: The limits and possibilities of non-heterosexual self-representation in online conversations. In K. O'Riordan & D.J. Phillips, *Queer online: Media, technology & sexuality* (pp. 81–100). New York: Peter Lang Publishers.

Law, J. (1999). After ANT: Complexity, naming and topology. In J. Law & J. Hassard (Eds.), *Actor network theory and after* (pp. 1–14). Oxford: Blackwell.

Light, B., Fletcher, G., & Adam, A. (2008). Gay men, Gaydar and the commodification of difference. *Information Technology & People*, *21*(3), 300–314. doi:10.1108/09593840810896046

Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

McHugh, M. (2013, October 28). Instagram relaxes its terms on censored hashtags, but its criteria remains confusing. *Digital Trends*. Retrieved from http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/instagram-relaxes-terms-censored-hashtags-criteria-remains-confusing/

McKee, A. (2014). Textual analysis. In S. Cunningham & S. Turnbull (Eds.), *The media & communications in Australia (4th Edition)* (pp. 31–42). Crows Nest, NWS, AU: Allen & Unwin.

Misoch, S. (2014). Card stories on YouTube: A new frame for online self-disclosure. *Media and Communication*, *2*(1), 2–12.

Morse, J., & Richards, L. (2002). *Read me first for a user's guide to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mowlabocus, S. (2010). *Gaydar culture: Gay men, technology and embodiment in the digital age*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

Nash, C. J. (2013). The age of the "post-mo"? Toronto's gay Village and a new generation. *Geoforum*, *49*, 243–252. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.11.023

Ng, E. (2013). A "Post-Gay" era? Media gaystreaming, homonormativity, and the politics of LGBT integration. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *6*(2), 258–283. doi:10.1111/cccr.12013

Orne, J. (2011). "You will always have to 'out' yourself": Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness. *Sexualities*, *14*(6), 681–703. doi:10.1177/1363460711420462

Rains, S. A., & Brunner, S. R. (2015). What can we learn about social network sites by studying Facebook? A call and recommendations for research on social network sites. *New Media & Society*, *17*(1), 114–131. doi:10.1177/1461444814546481

Richardson, D. (2005). Desiring sameness? The rise of a neoliberal politics of normalisation. *Antipode*, *37*(3), 515–535. doi:10.1111/j.0066-4812.2005.00509.x

Rogers, R. (2013). *Digital methods*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Sender, K. (2003). Sex sells: Sex, class, and taste in commercial gay and lesbian media. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *9*(3), 331–365.

Senft, T. M. (2013). Microcelebrity and the branded self. In J. Harley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 346–354). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Sieczkowski, C. (2015). Miley Cyrus comes out as pansexual. *Huffington Post.* Retrieved October 19, 2015, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/miley-cyrus-comes-out-

pansexual_55e05c7be4b0aec9f352d9f4

Sismondo, S. (2010). *An introduction to Science and Technology Studies (2nd ed.)*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Stern, J. (2012, April 9). Facebook buys Instagram for $1 billion. *ABC News*. Retrieved from http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/technology/2012/04/facebook-buys-instagram-for-1-billion/

Szulc, L., & Dhoest, A. (2013). The internet and sexual identity formation: Comparing Internet use before and after coming out. *The European Journal of Communication Research*, *38*(4), 347–365.

Thornham, S. (2007). *Women, feminism and media*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Thumim, N. (2012). *Self-representation and digital culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Warner, M. (1999). *The trouble with normal: Sex, politics, and the ethics of queer life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, R. (1974). *Television: Technology and cultural form*. London and New York: Routledge.